

Church on the Mall
June 21, 2015
Rev. Sarah A. Colwill
1 Samuel 17:32-49
Mark 4:35-41

“Calming the Storm”

This morning we have two big, we might even say cosmic, stories of the battle of good versus evil. Last week Samuel anointed David king over Israel even though he was the youngest, weakest, least likely of Jesse’s sons to be a king. This week we hear of him throwing himself into battle against the Philistine, Goliath. While the Israelite leaders are planning and waiting and plodding their strategy for how to defeat the giant, David confidently leaves his sheep-tending and suits up for battle. Confidently, because God is on his side. David easily wins the duel after just one shot of his sling and the Israelites are victorious. In our Gospel reading, Jesus calms a great storm, a miracle that confronts the mythical understanding that the seas were places where great powers and demons lived. This calming of the waters shows his power above and beyond all other powers in the world.

When David defeats Goliath, the order of things is messed up; the ways of the world are undone. This isn’t the logical way things are supposed to go. The Israelites are supposed to present their toughest, strongest, most threatening man for battle and the fiercest warrior shall win. But instead, this scrawny kid with a sling-shot shows up and actually defeats someone much older, stronger, and with more front-line experience. David’s confidence in God’s presence with him; his confidence that just as God was

with him when he was tending sheep that God would be with him now; his confidence that he could shed that awkward, bulky armor and prevail: David's faith upset the natural order of things. Because of his faith, something extraordinary happened and history didn't follow the logical, predictable script. Because of his faith, the toughest man didn't win; the strongest man didn't prevail. Because of his faith, the course of history took an unexpected turn and God's presence was made known in the world.

Faith also plays a role in our Gospel reading, but the disciples don't show the same confidence we see in the young boy David. They are in a boat, going across to the other side, presumably to minister to more people, so Jesus could teach and heal. But as often happens when out on the water, seemingly from out of nowhere, a raging storm emerges and bears down on them. These disciples are fishermen, so we can assume, if they are frightened, that this is no small storm. They are used to being out on rough seas; they are used to storms sneaking up on them; they are used to being in boats during bad weather. We can assume: this is no small storm.

Their tiny boat is bobbing like a cork amid huge, crashing waves that are coming down right into their vessel. Holding on for dear life, they have gone from bailing water to saying prayers, to arguing with one another how to survive, back to holding on and saying prayers. They are fighting for their lives; this really could be the end for them. They are surrounded by this monstrous storm with no end in sight and the time for their bobbing tiny boat to stay afloat seems to be coming to an end. Fear has gripped their souls and perhaps even they are trying to making nice with the monsters of the sea.

I have a colleague who has a phobia of flying, but she does it anyway. When there's turbulence and her fear really kicks-in, she said she does it all as far as rituals go: prays the Lord's Prayer, says the rosary, she crosses herself, crosses her fingers: anything and everything that might somehow promise her safety. When fear overtakes us, and we can feel the surges of adrenaline pumping through our veins, we become desperate, our only thoughts on survival. Surely those disciples were pulling out all the stops, doing whatever they could possibly think of that might work: desperate times calling for desperate measures.

Both of our stories this morning have situations that are anxiety producing and life-threatening. David facing the giant Philistine in a one-on-one battle. The disciples in a tiny boat in the midst of a violent storm. David has chosen his situation – because of his confidence in God's providence, his faith compels him to put himself right smack dab in the middle of a threatening situation. The disciples find themselves in their battle, not by their own choosing, and they most likely would have chosen otherwise were it up to them. David's faith is the prevailing sentiment in his story – it keeps him calm and urges him into this dangerous situation because that is where he feels called. The disciples' fear is the prevailing sentiment in their story – they are perishing in the storm and don't know what to do. They are scared.

We read that there are other boats there on the sea with them. I can't help but imagine that the disciples were perhaps a bit proud of the fact that they were in Jesus' boat. It's like they got in the "cool car" on the youth group trip. We've got Jesus in our

boat! What can go wrong with Jesus in your boat? It's like those bumper stickers that say Jesus is my co-pilot. Doesn't this evoke good, warm, safe feelings, like everything is going to be okay? Jesus is here, we're all good! Nothing to worry about. He's cozied up on the cushion taking a nap; it's all good here. Pushing away from shore, I imagine thoughts of confidence and maybe even a touch of pride were filling the disciples as they made their way to the other side with Jesus by their side.

But is that really the way it is when living a life of faith? As much as we want our lives to be comfortable, peaceful, settled, and content, this is not the life we sign up for when we answer the call to discipleship. As much as we would prefer to avoid suffering, calamity, and hardship, this is not the life we sign up for when we answer the call to discipleship. I think the disciples should have guessed by now that having Jesus in their boat was a sure sign that something controversial or calamitous was going to happen. Sometimes having Jesus in our boat means we are headed straight for the storm. Sometimes when our lives are chaotic and windblown and unsettled this is just when we are being the most faithful. Sometimes when our lives are at risk, when we are not safe – sometimes this is just when we are exhibiting the most faith.

Some aspects of Christianity have fallen into this belief that more faithful you are, the better graces you have with God, the better your life will be. This is known as the prosperity gospel, it picks out certain scripture passages to support the claim that God wants you to prosper – to be rich and comfortable and happy, and a prosperous life is proof that you have been faithful. The more money you have, the stronger your life of

Christianity. The happier you are, the more faithful you therefore must be. The more comfortable and successful you are, the more faithful you therefore must be.

One may be able to extract stories or lines of scripture to support this theology, but more often than not, our continual story of being God's people reveals to us that living a life of faith often sends us straight into the storm. When we live our lives intentionally following Jesus' commands; intentionally loving the unlovable, giving away more of our money than we really "should," speaking up in tense situations to stand up for God's justice, forgiving people who have done great harm – when we live a faithful life, we often find ourselves right in the midst of anxious, stressful, dangerous storms. When we live a faithful life we may do things that put our jobs at risk, that put our relationships with our children at risk, that put our pension plans at risk. Rather than secure a comfortable, flush future, living a life of faith risks stability for the sake of the Gospel, it risks safety and ease.

What if, on those rough seas, the disciples decided that this was a sign – this perilous storm was a sign that they were doing the wrong thing, headed in the wrong direction, traveling down the wrong path. What if they knew that their faith journey was going to be calm and loving and peaceful and safe and secure and this disastrous storm was obviously a sign to them that they were making the wrong decision by leaving their lives to follow this man Jesus. Don't we, after all, tend to look for similar signs? When things are easy, or they line up just so, or things seem to fall into place, we can be tempted to assume that is God making things work out for us. Maybe.

Maybe. But just because something is hard and stormy and we fail at first and our friends doubt us and it's obstacle after obstacle doesn't mean that that isn't the right path. We may be tempted to see ease of living as a sign from God that we are doing it right. But that also may be just a result of following the ways of the world. It may be that our path of discipleship will be littered with storms – situation after situation that needs attention, remedy, healing, love. It may be that when times are tough, this is actually the sign that we are in the right place, taking on the right mission.

God has revealed his kingdom in Jesus Christ: he desires mercy, he desires love, he desire forgiveness, he desire reconciliation, he desires healing, he desires the hungry to be fed and those in prison to be visited; he desires the lonely to be befriended and the lost to be found. Our journey of discipleship is spent finding a way to make that kingdom come, even when it means facing raging storms and violent winds, even when it means standing up for justice or speaking out against racism in this country, or helping victims of abuse, or walking the inner city streets to work with drug dealers – even when it means loving that one person your entire family hates or giving another chance to that one friend who lies and cheats and steals. Sometimes the storm is right where we are called to be.

David is anxious to suit up for battle. He trusts that God will be with him. His faith is admirable. He is confident that, just as God has been with him all his life, God would be with him now. Saul reluctantly sees him go, first at least – here – put this on; Saul has him at least wear his armor. But, it didn't fit. Saul's protection didn't work for

David. He needed to be himself. He needed the freedom to use his gifts, a keen eye and the weapon he knew well – a sling-shot.

When God calls us into the storms, we aren't expected to be someone else; we aren't expected to be someone bigger or bolder or more courageous: we need to be who we are. That bulky armor was intended to help David be the big, fearless warrior, but that wasn't who he was and that wasn't who God expected him to be and it wasn't who God needed him to be. God needed him to be himself. He was a shepherd with wicked aim. He was used to tending sheep, and had a keen eye. And he had faith that could move mountains. His success came from capitalizing on his strengths and being his best self, not trying to be someone he wasn't.

Those disciples sure seemed shocked – with their boat about to capsize and there Jesus is asleep on a cushion. Don't you care about us, they ask him? What happened to being in the “good” boat, the Jesus boat?! They thought it was a bonus, like it would all be okay. In a deeper sense, of course, it is a bonus, and with Jesus in their boat, it is all okay, but not for the reasons they may have first thought. Being beside Jesus means facing rough storms, difficult relationships, hard choices that alienate loved ones; being beside Jesus means getting involved when we might rather stay out of it, it means being intentional about working for peace and spending time we don't really have helping other people, it means risk, it means we'll be scared. But being with Jesus means that everything is ok. Our life of discipleship comes with it the basic, fundamental truth that

God is always with us, God will always give us the strength we need to live into our calling, and God will always see us through.

There's a reason God chose David to be the great king of Israel. His faith was almost unbelievable. It was the trait God needed most out of him, not bodily strength or age or experience. God will call us into storms and battles and conflicts and situations just the same, and use our gifts for his purpose, to show his love and compassion, to reach out into the world with peace and understanding. Thanks be to God. Amen.